Sportlife: medals, media and life courses of female Dutch Olympic champions, 1928-1940

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Marjet Derks *

Abstract: *»Ein Leben für den Sport. Medaillen, Medien und Lebensverläufe niederländischer Olympiasiegerinnen, 1928-1940«.* Starting from the assumption that cultural historical analyses can help our understanding of changes in life cycles and life courses, this article explores the way in which a specific sociocultural phenomenon, sport, changed and defined the life courses of women in pre-war Netherlands. While similar questions are often being researched from a psychological or sociological and hence short-term perspective, here a long term and biographical analysis is being applied. Focusing on a group of medal winning participants in the Olympic Games, the leading question is whether their physical talent allowed these women to pursue a different life course. A second question is how their international careers matched with dominant cultural life scripts, which stated that young women should prepare to become wives, mothers and homemakers. It can be concluded that the presented biographies reveal an ambiguous reality. On the one hand, sporting successes opened up several possibilities for the women concerned, who became public figures and their country's first national female sport heroes. Thus, they embodied the beginning of a new cultural feminine ideal that opened up existing scripts. Their personal life course underwent profound changes as well, albeit of a confusing nature. All coming from lower class families, they saw their social careers set off because of their swimming, but also getting disrupted because of it. Sport-related disagreeing life scripts were tensional rather than advantageous. At least in hindsight, the women blamed their sporting career for the strenuous course their lives took.

Keywords: Cultural life scripts, inter-war era, sporting careers, female sport heroes, biographical method.

1. Introduction

In 1940, black Wilma Glodean Rudolph was born prematurely in Clarksville, Tennessee, the 20th of a large family of 22 children. Her father worked on the railways as a porter and her mother was a maid to white families in the still-segregated city. The family was poor, her mother made dresses from flour sacks for her daughters. As a child, Wilma had several severe illnesses and on

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top of that, she contracted polio which forced her to wear a leg brace. Consequently, her life script – how, from a cultural perspective, she should live – left her few options. She was bound to live a life of poverty, stood a fair chance of remaining unmarried and having to struggle to earn a living, depending on her siblings. However, as it turned out, Rudolph was granted a full scholarship to Tennessee State University, received her bachelor's degree in elementary education there, and worked as a teacher. She visited President John F. Kennedy, and was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1994. There is a life-size bronze statue of Rudolph in Clarksville, as well as a Wilma Rudolph Boulevard. The United States Postal Service issued a 23-cent Distinguished Americans series postage stamp in recognition of her. In Berlin, the former American High School was renamed Wilma Rudolph Oberschule. The well-known producer Bud Greenspan made a television docudrama *Wilma* about her life.

All this was the result of Wilma Rudolph being the first women to win three gold medals in track and field (in the 100m, the 200m and the 4x100m relay) at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Having overcome her handicap through extensive therapy, her natural athletic ability emerged and made her the star of the American Olympic team. The Italian press nicknamed her 'La Gazella Negra' ('The Black Gazelle') because of her grace and long stride. This name remained with her for the rest of her life. Adding to her fame was the fact that the 1960 Olympics were the first one to be covered by international television.[1]

Rudolph's story does not stand alone. There are several other stories that depict the social and cultural upward mobility of poor, yet physically talented boys and girls through sport. Brasilian soccer player Edson Arantes do Nascimento (Pelé) has become the epitome of how sporting accomplishments can lead out of an impoverished background and into a life of wealth and success. In the Netherlands, the Johan Cruyff-story is a case in point: son of a couple that ran a potato grocery in post-war suburban Amsterdam, he became one of the world's best known soccer players and, eventually, coaches, with an according lifestyle. 1964 Olympic judo champion Anton Geesink, another compelling example, climbed up the ladder from the poorer quarters of Utrecht to the membership of the powerful International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Although research shows that in reality upward social mobility through sport is scarce, particularly in the long run, these are nevertheless gripping stories (Spaaij 2011, 1-2). They refer to domains that are potentially life script-changing. Talent for sports is one of these domains, next to intellectual, creative, and socio-affective giftedness. Talent alone is not sufficient and it is not even always exploited. But increasingly, large investments are put into careers, both at a personal, family and societal level. The latter refers to the growing importance that nations, sponsors and media attach to success in sport, which in

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2012/jun/01/50-stunning-olympic-moments-wilma-rudolph> (accessed August 28, 2013).

return adds to the attractiveness the pursuit of a sporting career has for individuals (Van Rossem 2009, 753; Bates and Monday 2005).

Contemporary interest in sport is the outcome of historical processes of modernization, mediatization and massification that took off in the second half of the 19th century and particularly took shape in the 20th century, when the socio-cultural importance significance of sport increased immensely. During these processes, the notion of the sport hero emerged as a new cultural type. It was constructed as a powerful category of cultural as well as individual identification, as is illustrated by the cases of Rudolph, Pelé, Cruyff and Geesink. Sociologist Smart has typified this as a cultural economy of sporting celebrities that is the product of mediatized and, consequently, dramatized sport (Smart 2005; Drucker 1994). It can be argued that during the 20th century, mass culture emerged as one of the basic spheres for the formation of personal identity (Hargreaves 2013). However, the emphasis in research is rather on the sociological and psychological aspects of sporting careers than on historical analyses of the way these came into being, how they influenced identities, and how the very notion of a sporting career changed over time.

In this article, I explore the significance of sport talent for the cultural life scripts of a specific sporting category in pre-war Netherlands, when sport was gradually becoming a large-scale and culturally acknowledged phenomenon. By focusing on young Dutch elite female athletes in the 1920s and 1930s, I add a second specification: that of gender. Dominant stories of sport heroes often exclude the struggles and achievements of specific groups of women (Hargreaves 2013, 1-5). The aforementioned athletes were all medal winning participants in the Olympic Games, which was becoming a world-wide acknowledged phenomenon that attracted growing media attention in this period. The leading question is if and how their Olympic success allowed these physically talented women to pursue a different life course and, consequently if and how it influenced their social clocks and family time. To find answers, I first sketch a general impression of dominant cultural life scripts for women in this period. Next, I present a list of all female Dutch participants in Olympic Games and their backgrounds. Then, by applying a biographical approach as a useful category in sport historical research (Carless and Douglas 2012; Woolridge 2008; Bale, Christensen and Pfister 2004) I explore in a more detailed manner the way in which the sporting talent and success influenced the lives of three specific athletes. In between, I briefly explore how, on a societal level, this process invoked the rise of a new life script in which the pursuit of a sporting career could become a cultural ideal for women.

2. Leisure, Sport and Dominant Cultural Life Scripts

Looking at the dominant cultural life script for women in pre-war Netherlands, it is obvious that, regardless of any denominational or ideological background, the general norm for them was to marry and raise children. Women were seen as the primary actors to guarantee the care for husband and children and, as such, harmonious family life. Her place was at home, her role that of homemaker. This was seen as the cornerstone of societal peace and harmony, particularly in times of social unrest or economic depression (Blom 1996, 223-4). Couldn't a woman be a biological mother, then a respected (Catholic) alternative was to become a spiritual one by entering a convent and work for the greater good of those in need.

However, this script was under pressure as a new type of womanhood was, albeit tentatively, emerging after the First World War. Although not as distinctly as in surrounding countries, a growing number of women from all denominations (Catholics and orthodox Protestants gradually joining the forerunners from liberal and other non-religious groups) either postponed marriage or did not marry at all. Due to increasing possibilities to enter high school and even university, they aimed at longer and better education, followed by a career or travelling (Renders and Arnoldussen 2003; Mocquette 1913, 87-8). But this 'egoistic intellectualism', as it was labeled by critical contemporary commentators, was predominantly an upper and higher middle class phenomenon, and even there, societal pressure was being felt (Derks 2007, 372-92). For the majority of middle and lower class girls and women, their cultural life script was predictable; they were most likely to marry somewhere in their twenties to someone from their own class and denomination, give up any job they had (unless their husband did not earn enough money), have children and become homemakers and caretakers.

In these years, sport for women was still primarily perceived as a higher middle class pleasure. While from the turn of the century onwards, sport had trickled down as an acceptable and pleasurable activity for boys and men from middle and lower classes, sporting girls and women caused public dispute and discussion throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Modern sport, characterized by competition, organization and regulation, was associated with modernity and all its complexities and therefore perceived as potentially threatening to the fixed structures and beliefs of pillarized Dutch society that originated in rural traditionalism.

Despite these antagonistic perceptions, modern sport gained following, both from participants and, even more so, from a growing audience. While soccer was by far the largest sport in the Netherlands, swimming also held an exceptional place. From an early age on, learning to swim was encouraged as a counterforce to the number of people who died because of drowning in the country's many canals, rivers and lakes. When due to liberal initiatives from the

second half of the 19th century onwards, swimming pools were built, swimming gained popularity as a form of leisure. This resulted in a growing number of swimming clubs from 1870 onwards, particularly in the cities in the west and middle of the country. While many sports were perceived as unsuitable activities for women, for instance because they were too strenuous (and potentially harmful to the reproductive organs) or showed too much of women's bodies, swimming met some tolerance. On the condition that there were separate swimming hours for men and women, swimming was regarded practical as well as elegant and feminine. Because several women were dissatisfied with the limited number of hours they could swim, they established women's swimming clubs. The first one was located in Amsterdam (Hollandsche Dames Zwemclub, HDZ, 1887), followed by another in 1914 (Amsterdamsche Dames Zwemclub ADZ). Rotterdam also had two (Rotterdamsche Dames Zwemclub RDZ, 1913, and Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub ODZ, 1922). While the Amsterdam clubs were predominantly aiming at middle class girls and women, the Rotterdam clubs were typically lower class clubs, thus contributing to the democratization of sport (Duinker, Mulder and Planjer 1963; *Gedenkboek* 1933).

3. Female Olympic participants

Women practising local sport in segregated clubs were one thing, but competition on a national and even international level in front of an international audience was something else. Nevertheless, this development took shape in the prewar era, and although the attempts were not undisputed, their number and cultural importance grew steadily. This can be illustrated by the number of women that participated in the Olympic Games, a recurring international sporting event that gained momentum during the 1920s and 1930s. Its legacy is still a powerful one in the 21st century (Dyreson 2008). Olympic participants represented the top layer of female sporting activity and their number is not necessarily a reflection of the total sum of participants at lower levels. Nevertheless, because of the serial nature of the Olympics, the numbers of participants offer an overview of both national and international developments in sport, particularly where gender is concerned.

While some women from other countries started participating even before World War I (in lawn tennis, golf, yachting, croquet, equestrian, archery, and swimming), the first appearance by a Dutch woman was made in 1920 at the Games of Antwerp. Unsurprisingly, she was a swimmer, Rie Beisenherz from Amsterdam. She set the tone for generations to come (Zijlstra 1971; Adriani Engels 1960). The table (see appendix, table 1) and diagrams give an indication of the general backgrounds of the first generation of Dutch female Olympic participants, their age, place of living, and the type of sport they practised.

The listing (see appendix, table 1) shows that sport for women in the 1920s and 1930s was predominantly an urban thing. The large majority of Olympic participants came from the three largest towns in the country: Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague. Not surprisingly, these were the locus and embodiment of modernity in the Netherlands, having the largest number of jobs, educational institutes, and modern leisure facilities such as sport clubs. Furthermore, social control was likely to be less in the city than in the countryside, thus offering more opportunities to experiment or negotiate with dominant cultural life scripts (De Keizer and Tates 2004).

Looking at the age women held when entering Olympic competition, it can be stated that in general, they were in their early twenties and single. An exception was the fencing participants, who were considerably older and sometimes even married. This exceptional behaviour was tolerated because of fencing's elite character and because these women generally came from typically fencing families, in which both their fathers and husbands were fencers themselves. Remarkably, the general age of participants dropped significantly as their number increased. This was particularly the case in 1928, when the Games were held in Amsterdam, and the attraction for participating was obviously much higher while the (financial) threshold was lower.

Figure1: Number of Female Dutch Olympic Participants

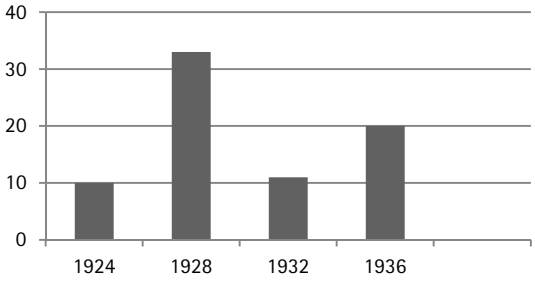
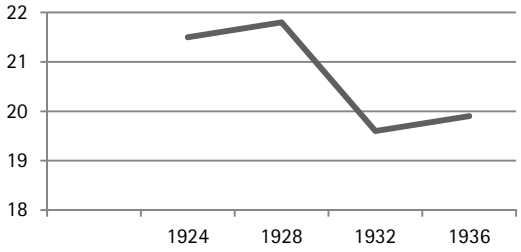
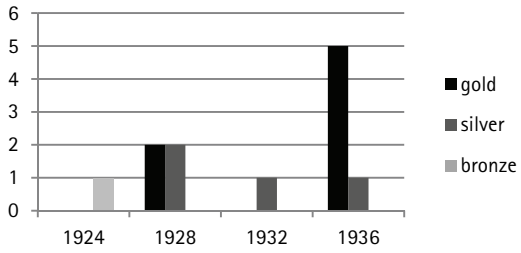


Figure 2: Age of Female Dutch Olympic Participants



Looking at the results, it can be stated that the effort and preparation obviously augmented as the notion of 'Olympic Games' gained awareness. While the first (bronze) medal, won in 1924 by Kea Bouman in the doubles in tennis, can be labelled as quite fortunate, in the following years the medal harvest resulted from focused training and organization. In comparison to Dutch male competitors, sporting women became increasingly successful. Although the men started competing earlier (from 1900 onwards) and in much more categories, their performances showed a downward line: they won one golden medal in 1990, four in each of the Games of 1920, 1924 and 1928, but then only one in 1932 and two in 1936, predominantly in cycling, equestrian, and sailing. The much smaller delegation of Dutch women won two golden and two silver medals in 1928 and an unprecedented five golden and one silver in 1936. They were likewise specialized, because all of their golden medals but for one were won in swimming.

Figure 3: Number and Type of Olympic Medals gained by Dutch Female Athletes



4. Three Swimming Lives

A biographical approach may shed some light on the distinct way in which sport 'interfered' with women's lives in the pre-war years and enables us to give a more differentiated analysis of their cultural life scripts. I therefore take a closer look at three (very) young women who were talented in the most successful women's sport in the interwar era, swimming.

Initially, there was the first female Dutch winner of a golden medal, Maria Johanna ('Zus') Braun. She was born in 1911 in Rotterdam in a swimming-loving family. Her father was a barber who had been a keen swimmer and water polo player, just as her mother had been an ardent swimmer when she was young. This mother, Maria Johanna Braun-Voorwinde, was to play an important role in Zus' swimming career. A-typically for women of her time, 'Ma Braun' as she was called, continued to swim after her marriage. After some hesi-

tation, her husband tolerated her having a paid job. She started working as a swimming instructor at Rotterdam schools and ended up being a coach at swimming club ODZ (Onderling Dames Zwemclub – Mutual Ladies Swimming Club). She took up that job after having seen a demonstration of the Amsterdam Dutch Ladies Swimming Club (HDZ) and watching the American dominance in women's swimming at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris.[2] Being an autodidact, she began to experiment with stroke techniques, tough new training methods and dietary regimes and applied these to her 'school' of swimmers, among who were Marie Baron and her own daughter Zus (Paauw 1991).

Because of her mother's work, Zus Braun's social clock was dominated from an early age on by the training hours at the swimming pool. Her entire youth was spent there and inevitably, she became involved in the sport herself. She learned to swim when she was two; obtained her first diploma at the age of three, her first national title when she was thirteen and in the second half of the 1920s became an accomplished international competitor. In 1927 she became first Dutch, then European champion in the 400 metres freestyle in Bologna. There, she also won two silver medals. During the Games of 1928, Zus Braun became a national hero when she won the 100 meter backstroke and finished second in the 400 meter freestyle.

Quite unexpectedly, in 1931 Zus Braun announced her marriage to a waiter. The Dutch press was in shock, because Zus was supposed to be participating at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles a year later. A dispute with the Dutch Swimming Association allegedly had lead to her decision: 'Swimming is no longer number one in my life', Zus declared. The comment in *Het Vaderland*, a Dutch newspaper, exemplified the ambiguous attitude of the public towards competitive sport for women:

> Now she is getting married tomorrow, Zus Braun. She is about to follow her calling as a wife and, possibly, a mother. The latter is still the highest honorary title any woman can earn and to that, all world records and championships have to yield to (Het Vaderland, September 1931).

Public attention for her wedding was enormous, but even greater was the relief when two days later, during her wedding dinner, Zus announced that 'she hoped she wouldn't be lost for swimming in the future'. A year later, she participated in the Olympic Games, however, quite unsuccessfully due to a curious incident with an insect, for which she was taken to hospital and held in the United States for several months. After this, Philipsen-Braun quitted swimming (Scherer 2012a; Derks 1994).

A second, perhaps even greater swimmer was Hendrika Wilhelmina (Rie) Mastenbroek. She was born on February 2, 1919 in Rotterdam in circumstances that were frowned upon in the inter-war years. Her parents were not married, her mother worked as a cleaner and she spent a large part of her youth with her

[2] Ma Braun over haar discipelen. Sumatra Post, February 19, 1935.

grandparents, who ran a cafe. Her cultural life script suggested a similar lower class life. After primary school, Rie attended a so-called industrial school that prepared lower class girls to make a living with 'honest and decent female work'. She wanted to become a nurse, for which additional courses were necessary. Swimming, always in the cheap hours, at first had been a common thing to learn in a country full of water, but soon turned into her only hobby – a hobby she was good at. When she turned eleven, 'Ma' Braun saw her talent and advised her to enter swimming competition at the Onderlinge Dames Zwemclub (ODZ), where she was working as a coach.[3]

In 1934, at the age of fifteen, Mastenbroek had her international breakthrough when she won three golden and one silver medal at the European Championship in Magdeburg (Germany). Two years later, she gathered a similar harvest at the Olympic Games in Berlin and was the first woman ever to do so. Because of these performances, she acquired the nickname 'Kaiserin of Berlin'. Mastenbroek's medals, together with the gold of another Dutch swimmer, Nida Senff from Amsterdam, and the gold in the 4x100 metres relay, resulted in a hitherto unknown Dutch dominance. Soon afterwards, it turned out that Dutch female swimmers held fourteen out of 26 world records, far more than the United States which had been the world's leading swim nation up until then (Derks 2012).

Several of these records were swum by another young girl from Rotterdam, named Willy (also: Willemijntje) den Ouden. She was born in 1918, second daughter in a family of four children. Her father held the well-known Cafe Modern in the centre of Rotterdam. Her talent for swimming was recognized on an early age by Pieternel van Wuyckhuise-Groen, coach of another Rotterdam Swimming Club for Women, R.D.Z. Again, we see the combination of a middle-aged, married female coach and a young swimming girl. This was an acceptable match because it resembled common cultural family models. If a girl was going to compete, even internationally, then only when being accompanied and taken care of by a motherly figure.

As a 13-year old, Den Ouden won a silver medal at the European championship in Paris (100 metres freestyle) and a golden one with the relay team. To participate in the 1932 Olympics, she even got dispensation because of her young age. There, again she won a silver relay medal, followed by a golden one four years later in Berlin. By then, she had already become a well-known name all over Europe, where she attended swimming competitions together with her coach, and repeatedly set new world records, despite her nerves. Her record on the 100 metres freestyle of 1936 would last for twenty years. After another silver medal at the European championships of 1938 in London, she ended her swimming career at the age of 20 (Scherer 2012c).

[3] Rie was interviewed in 1935, at the age of 16, by a reporter. See: Ma Braun over haar discipelen. In: Sumatra Post, February 19, 1935.

5. Medals and Life Scripts in Transformation

What was the impact of the Olympic successes on these young girls' lives? All three of them were coming from lower or lower-middle class families, had no higher education and were likely to lead a life similar to that of other women of their social class. Did the fact that women swimmers were incomparably the most popular sportspeople of the time have an impact on their life course? Although these questions can be answered positively, the effects were by no means unambiguous. It can be stated, however, that their medals caused an undeniable change in their own lives. Furthermore, their successes and the following public acclaim even incited the rise of a new cultural model for young women's lives, thus opening up dominant cultural life scripts.

This was most noticeable when looking at several female champion swimmers in other countries, whose life courses diverted from their cultural script because of their success in sport. In 1932, Eleanor Holm, daughter of a Brooklyn fireman, won the 100 m backstroke at the Olympic Games of Los Angeles. This was partly due to the fact that Zus Braun had been thrown out of competition because of the aforementioned much disputed bite by an insect. Immediately after her victory, at the age of 19, Holm obtained a film contract at Warner Brothers and went starring in several movies. One of her roles was that of Jane in a Tarzan film, co-featuring swimmer Johnny Weismuller, who had been a star at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam. Although her swimming career was not prolonged, Holm pursued a celebrity career as actress and singer, socialite and interior designer. Accordingly, she married three times and had several controversial affairs.[4]

A similar deep impact was noticeable in the life of Danish champion Ragnhild Hveger, who as a 15 year old girl finished third in one of Mastenbroek's golden races in 1936. The youngest of five children of a train driver from Helsingør, Hveger continued swimming, setting a number of world records, and became Denmark's first sporting star in the modern sense of the term. She had public interest gathered around her whole person, including her private and emotional life. Her swimming successes, along with her blonde wholesome appearances (her nickname was 'the golden torpedo'), her popularity and her parents' membership of the Danish Nazi Party made her a German idol after the occupation of Denmark in 1940. She made numerous trips to Germany, where she was celebrated by high party officials and eventually married a German officer. After the war, her popularity waned because of her close associations with the Nazis. From then on, Hveger led a secluded life.[5]

[4] <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1003879/index.htm> (accessed August 30, 2013).

[5] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/sport-obituaries/8973925/Ragnhild-Hveger.html> (accessed August 30, 2013).

In comparison to their adversaries, the Dutch champions never experienced such a celebrity status, although they were immensely popular in the Netherlands. Mediatization certainly added to that. Old media like newspapers and new media like the illustrated sport press, the radio and the cinema news *Polygoon* acted like cultural mediators and frequently reported on the swimming girls and their achievements. Interviews, large public honouring with speeches, flowers and rides in their hometowns added to their growing popularity. Sometimes the honouring was primarily local. Rotterdam celebrated the successes of Braun, Mastenbroek and Den Ouden as proof of the city's vitality and its image of being a powerful town of labourers (Derks 1995, 89). More often, however, the female champions were appropriated as national symbols who illustrated the strength of the Netherlands as a country that had triumphed in and over the water, its natural adversary. They were the best thinkable representation of 'Dutchness' in the world. Moreover, they were represented as the symbols of a nation that was overcoming economic depression by hard work and staying true to its nature of sobriety. Typical in this respect was the welcome speech by Karel Lotsy, well-known board member of the Dutch Olympic Committee, after the return of the swimming crew from the Olympic Games of Los Angeles in 1932: "Many of you have become movie stars, but you have returned being like when you departed: simple and sporty. [...] Above all, remain simple and true to our beloved red, white and blue."[6]

Despite this ambiguous emphasis on pride as well as female modesty, the Olympic swimming champions enjoyed a hitherto unprecedented status. They were invited for radio talks, opening shops and attaining meetings. Their houses were beleaguered (on one occasion, the Rotterdam police even battled with the enthusiast crowd), their clothing style was copied. Mastenbroek alone received 43 invitations to attend cinemas that broadcasted the *Polygoon* news. Sport journalist Adriani Engels noted the existence of a 'Rie-cult' in the Netherlands (Adriani Engels 1960, 332-42). Furthermore, their success resulted in increasing membership for swimming clubs, with numerous girls wanting similar successes.[7] As such, the swimmers had begun to create a new cultural ideal, even though it was ill-compatible with dominant life scripts for women. These dominant gendered cultural patterns still played an important role. Compared to contemporary male sport heroes like soccer player Beb Bakhuys or cyclist Piet Moeskops, who succeeded in obtaining substantial financial benefit even without Olympic medals, the female swimmers hardly gained any money or social benefits. To the contrary, their personal lives became complicated by the ill-matching reality of the dominant cultural life script and their success. In addition, the very factor that had made competitive swimming acceptable, the

[6] De terugkeer van de Olympische ploeg. Revue der Sporten 25, August 10, 1932, 27 (accessed August 30, 2013).

[7] <http://www.zwemmenindepolder.nl/historisch-overzicht/historie-1920-1940.html> (accessed August 30, 2013).

presence of a female coach that acted as a mother figure (and in the case of Zus Braun even was her biological mother) turned out to be extra complicating.

Shortly after her triumphant performances at the Olympic Games of 1936, Rie Mastenbroek clashed with her trainer. Ma Braun wanted to have more of a say about Rie's life and even started a legal procedure to deprive her single mother out of her parental rights. This failed and led to a breach of trust between coach and pupil. In addition, Rie increasingly experienced all public attention as a burden and by the end of 1936 decided to stop swimming altogether. A possible return to the sport became impossible after she started working as a swimming instructor to support herself, because this was seen by the Dutch national Swimming Association as incompatible with official Olympic amateur rules. Rie married in 1939, at the age of twenty, with a man who had nothing to do with swimming. They had two children and then divorced. After that, she moved to Amsterdam and worked as a single mother in various jobs. After having a child out of wedlock, she remarried. She became increasingly bitter about her successful past, its many efforts and little gains, and particularly about the criticism that had started to arise in post-war Netherlands about the fact that she had participated in Olympic Games organised by the Nazis (Derks 2012; Scherer 2012b; Zevenbergen 2004).[8]

More than any of the other female swimmers, Willy Den Ouden became the nation's darling. This was partly due to her young age, but also because of her good looks. Songs were composed cheering her, male journalists rallied to interview her, girls wanted to be like her. Den Ouden was the only one of the champions who decided to make a switch from a career in swimming to one in the movies, as several of her competitors had done. In 1939 she succeeded in obtaining a role in a Belgian movie (*Van het een komt het ander – One thing leads to another*), but filming had to be stopped because of the outbreak of the war. She fled to London, starting working as a secretary, and met a Swedish diplomat whom she married. After the war and a divorce, she returned to Rotterdam, where the German bombings had destroyed her family home with all of her medals in it. She remarried twice, but her marriages never lasted long. She then started working in the fur trade. Den Ouden avoided looking back on her swimming career and refused to talk about it, particularly to the press (Scherer 2012c).

Zus Braun finally fought the hardest personal battle. She felt overpowered and forced by her mother's severe regime of training. On the one hand, Ma Braun was the first great woman coach of world class women swimmers, who turned around dominant gender images by stating that girls were much more capable of hard training than boys. On the other hand, she was an explosive personality of great temperament and similar ambition. She rejected all criticism on her approach: "I never noticed anything that resembled over-training. Our girls too young? Well, swimming just needs to be learned at an early age."

[8] Interview with Rie Mastenbroek, April 1995.

(Paauw 1994). Her daughter complied for a while, but eventually felt denied a 'normal' life. This had already manifested itself when, after her marriage in 1931, partly due to her mother pressuring her, she decided to stay on as a competitive swimmer, thus challenging the dominant female life script. However, this caused enormous stress. She started having nightmares about having to perform. It turned out all the more disappointing when the 1932 Olympics ended dramatically, with Zus in hospital. After this experience, she decided to quit swimming and started focussing on family life. From 1934 onwards, she had three sons and a daughter and, together with her husband, ran a catering company in Rotterdam. As she grew older, the memories of her Olympic success became even more bitter and mentioning them was forbidden. She threw all newspaper cuttings away and refused any interviews. Furthermore, she refused to attain any of her daughter's swimming competitions (Scherer 2012a).[9]

5. Concluding Remarks

Starting from the assumption that cultural historical analyses can help our understanding of changes in life cycles and life courses, this article explored the way in which a specific socio-cultural phenomenon, sport, changed and defined social clocks of sporting women in pre-war Netherlands. It also questioned how their international careers matched with dominant cultural life scripts, which stated that young women should prepare to become wives, mothers and homemakers. While questions on how sport influences life courses and identities are often being researched from a psychological or sociological and hence short-term perspective (Kraaykamp, Oldenkamp and Breedveld 2013), here a long term and biographical analysis was applied.

Focusing on young Dutch elite female athletes in the 1920s and 1930s, all being medal winning participants in the Olympic Games, the leading question was whether their physical talent allowed these women to pursue a different life course. While success in sport has become a much desired cultural ideal – the start of which had its roots in the 1920s and 1930s, as the very notion of a sport hero culturally emerged then and began to challenge dominant cultural life scripts – the presented biographies reveal much more ambiguous realities. On the one hand, sporting success opened up several possibilities for the women concerned (although not as profoundly as for some of their international competitors). All coming from lower class families, sport gave them the opportunity to travel, meet people from other cultures and experience a larger world than most of their contemporaries. They also became public figures. This all happened early in their life course (most were teenagers at the time of their

[9] Interview with Rie Smit-Vierdag, April 1995.

success), yet not in an unequivocally successful way. Although their sporting careers did not seem to have influenced their choice to marry, and neither the time of marriage (all married at a fairly young age, as was appropriate for women of their social class), the follow-up often was chaotic and confusing at least. Social careers set off because of their swimming, but also got disrupted, sometimes because of it. At least in hindsight, the women seemed to blame their sporting career for the disappointments in their lives. Their memory was remarkably negative. Although limited in scope and number, this analysis calls for more large-scale and international comparative research, because it seems to reflect more recent accounts of ambiguous experiences of elite athletes pertaining to their life course (Wilding, Hunter-Thomas and Thomas 2012; Carless and Douglas 2012).

6. Epilogue

While focusing on the Olympic swimmers, another successful group of Olympic participants has remained under-exposed. On Thursday August 9, 1928, twelve female gymnasts surprisingly won a golden medal for their performance in synchronized calisthenics. It was the first time for women's gymnastics to be on the Olympic agenda. All twelve women came from two clubs, one in The Hague and another in Amsterdam. All but one were in their early twenties, all were unmarried. After a year and a half of intense preparations, lead by their amiable coach Gerrit Kleerekoper, they convincingly won two of the three parts of the event, which made them the overall winners. They were cheered upon by the enthusiastic audience and the Dutch sporting press: 'our resolute gymnast girls' and 'outshining sportswomen,' some of the headlines said. As a result, public attendance at gymnastic performances noticeably increased (Van Buuren and Derks 2012).

How did this triumph affect their life course? For several of them, like Annie van der Vegt, it was a stage in their career, for they were already trained as teachers in physical education. Alie van den Bos became heavily involved in Olympic sports: she was the coach of the Dutch gymnastic team that ended 5th at the Olympic Games in London in 1948. At the end of her long life, in 2003, she received the Olympic Order, the highest Olympic award, which was given to her by Olympic legend Anton Geesink.

However, the life course of Stella Agsteribbe, Ans Polak, Lea Nordheim and Judikje Simons took a turn that was unforeseen on that golden day in 1928. They married, some had children, but their lives all ended in 1943 in German concentration camps, as did that of their coach Kleerekoper (Brouwer 2010). Their Jewish background defined their script in a way their golden medal never had. Only Elka de Levie, another Jewish member of the team, survived the war.

Appendix

Table 1: Dutch Female Olympic Participants 1920-1936

Year	Town	Name	Year of Birth	Place of Birth	Sport	Result
1920	Antwerp	Beisenherz, Rie	1901	Amsterdam	swimming	
1924	Paris	Admiraal-Meijerink, Adriana Johanna Jacoba	1893	Haarlem	fencing	
		Bante, Hendriks Theodora	1901	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Baron, Marie (Mietje)	1908	Rotterdam		
		Boer, Johanna Jacoba (Jo) de	1901	Amsterdam	fencing	
		Bolten, Alida Cornelia (Ada)	1903	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Bouman, Cornelia (Kea)	1903	Almelo	tennis	bronze
		Klapwijk, Geertruida (Truus)	1904	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Stokhuyzen-de Jong, Johanna Petronella Lambertina	1895	Leiden	fencing	
		Vierdag, Maria (Rie)	1905	Amersfoort	swimming	
1928	Amsterdam	Aengenendt, Mechlina Agnes Elisabeth (Lies)	1907	Nijmegen	track&field	
		Admiraal-Meijerink Adriana Johanna Jacoba (2)	1893	Haarlem	fencing	
		Agsterribbe, Estella (Stella)	1909	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Baron, Marie (2)	1908	Rotterdam	swimming	silver
		Baumeister, Geertruida Christina (Truus)	1907	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Berg, Jacomina Elisabeth Sophia van den (Mien)	1909	The Hague	gymnastics	gold
		Boer, Johanna Jacoba (Jo) de (2)	1901	Amsterdam	fencing	
		Bos, Alida Johanna van den (Alie)	1902	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Braun, Maria Johanna (Zus)	1911	Rotterdam	swimming	gold silver
		Briejer, Maria Wilhelmina (Rie)	1910	Leiden	track&field	
		Buisma, IJke	1907	Aalsmeer	track&field	
		Burgerhof, Petronella (Nel)	1908	The Hague	gymnastics	gold
		Dekens, Berendina Johanna (Bets)	1906	Groningen	track&field	
		Gelder, Cornelia (Cor) van	1904	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Gisolf, Carolina Anna (Lien)	1910	Fort de Kock (Dutch Indies)	track&field	

Table 1 continued...

1928		Grendel, Adriana Elisabeth (Jeanne)	1913	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Grooss, Jeannette Hendrika (Nettie)	1905	The Hague	track&field	
		Hesterman, Catharina Elisabeth	1902	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Horst, Elisabeth (Bets) ter	1908	Hengelo	track&field	
		Klapwijk, Geertruida (Truus) (2)	1904	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Koderitsch, Friede-rike Wilhelmine Eberhar-dine	1894	The Hague	fencing	
		Leeuwen, Alide Impia Maria van	1908	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Levie, Elka	1905	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Mallon, Adriana Johanna (Annie)	1905	Gouda	track&field	
		Michaëlis, Helena Cornelia (Lena)	1905	The Hague	track&field	
		Noort, Agatha Maria (Aat) van	1908	Leiden	track&field	
		Norden, Margaretha Theodora Johanna	1911	Zaandam	swimming	
		Nordheim, Helena (Lea)	1903	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Polak, Anna (Ans)	1906	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Randwijk, Petronella Phillemina Johanna (Nel) van	1905	Utrecht	gymnastics	gold
		Rumt, Hendrika Alida (Riek) van	1897	Amsterdam	gymnastics	gold
		Simons, Judikje	1904	The Hague	gymnastics	gold
		Smits, Eva Anna Gijsberta (Eva)	1906	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Stelma, Jacoba Cornelia (Co)	1904	The Hague	gymnastics	gold
		Vegt, Annie van der	1903	The Hague	gymnastics	gold
		Vierdag, Maria (Rie) (2)	1905	Amersfoort	swimming	
1932	Los Angeles	Aalten, Cornelia (Cor)	1913	Breukelen	track&field	
		Boer, Johanna Jacoba (Jo) de (3)	1901	Amsterdam	fencing	
		Dalmolen, Johanna (Jo)	1912	Enschede	track&field	
		Gisolf, Carolina Anna (Lien) (2)	1910	Fort de Kock (Dutch Indies)	track&field	
		Laddé, Cornelia (Corrie)	1915	Batavia (Dutch Indies)	swimming	silver
		Mée, Elisabeth (Bep)	1914	Amsterdam	track&field	

Table 1 continued...

1932		Ouden, Willemijntje (Willy) den	1918	Rotterdam	swimming	silver
		Oversloot, Maria Petronella (Puck)	1914	Rotterdam	swimming	silver
		(Philipsen-)Braun, Maria Johanna (Zus)	1911	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Schuurman, Tollina Wilhelmina (Tollien)	1913	Zorgvlied	track& field	
		Vierdag, Maria (Rie) (3)	1905	Amersfoort	swimming	silver
1936	Garmisch Parten-kirchen (Winter)	Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Gratie MariaMargaretha	1912	Doorn	skiing	
	Berlin	Blankers-)Koen, Francine Elsje (Fanny)	1918	Baarn	track& field	
		Braake, Catharina Elisabeth (Kitty) ter	1913	Amsterdam	track& field	
		Doorgeest, Agatha Maria (Agaath)	1914	Amsterdam	track& field	
		Kastein, Jeannette Hermine (Jenny)	1913	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Kerkmeester, Alber-dina Geertruida (Truus)	1921	Utrecht	swimming	
		Klaauw, Catharina Maria (Toos)	1915	The Hague	fencing	
		Kock, Clasina (Gien)	1908	Amsterdam	track& field	
		Koning, Elisabeth Goverdina (Lies)	1917	Zandvoort	track& field	
		Koopmans, Jantina Maria (Tiny)	1912	Groningen	track& field	
		Mastenbroek, Hend-rika Wilhelmina (Rie)	1913	Rotterdam	swimming	3xgold silver
		Ouden, Willemijntje (Willy) den (2)	1918	Rotterdam	swimming	gold silver
		Panhorst-Niehorst, Anna Elisabeth (Ans)	1918	Amsterdam	track& field	
		Selbach, Johanna Katarina (Jopie)	1918	Haarlem	swimming	gold
		Senff, Dina Wil-helmina Jacoba (Nida)	1920	Rotterdam	swimming	gold
		Stroomberg, Johanna Marga-retha (Jo)	1919	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Timmermans, Anna Petronella (Ans)	1919	Rotterdam	swimming	
		Vries, Alida Elisabeth Christina (Ali) de	1914	Den Helder	track& field	
		Waalberg, Johanna Maria Elisabeth (Jopie)	1920	Amsterdam	swimming	
		Wagner, Catharina Wilhelmina (Tiny)	1919	Amsterdam	swimming	gold

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